

## **Multidisciplinarity in Development studies: Opportunities, challenges and realities**

*Report by Michael Chaves et Leticia do Valle*

Within the context of the international seminar led by IEDES and EADI and the launching of the 248th edition of the *Revue internationale des études du développement*, a space was provided to discuss the realities and challenges of multidisciplinarity in development studies.

The presentation turned around three main questions:

- 1) What is the practical reality of multidisciplinarity in an institutional context? How is multidisciplinarity put into practice? Is there a difference between working in a monodisciplinary and multidisciplinary context?
- 2) How does this context influence the way of your research?
- 3) How does it influence you as a researcher? How might this context influence your future work?

To answer these questions, 6 Ph.D. students from different universities were invited.

- **Morgane Rosier** PHD student in development studies School of national development and global studies-University of OTAWA. Morgane is researching in foreign aid on international cooperation-Montreal.
- **Antoine Castet and Jean Baptiste Guiffard** PHD students in economics in Panthéon Sorbonne Paris 1 university. Antoine is researching in land grabbing in sub-Saharan Africa. Jean Baptiste does research on governance in communication technologies and development in Africa and middle east. They created a multidisciplinary seminar named Automat.
- **Owasim Akram**, PHD student in political science in Örebro University. Owasim have a large experience in poverty programs and now he is researching in extreme poverty and ageing in Bangladesh.
- **Elsa Gautrain**, PHD student in economics, University of Clermont Ferrand. She is interested in choices and constraints that guide the evolution of household composition in the developing world. Elsa's research is focused on household, women and migration, and how migration can influence women in the emancipation process.
- **Emma Tyrou**, PHD student in political economy in Sorbonne Nouvelle University. Her research interest focuses on the State role in land grabbing in American Continent from a political economy point of view. Emma also coordinates a gender doctoral network, which is connected with the EADI.

The results of the conversation are summarized around two major themes. The challenges and the potentialities of multidisciplinary research. The following are the main ideas that emerged from this round table discussion

### **Multidisciplinarity as a challenge**

First of all, multidisciplinary is not an option for some researchers. The idea of generating high impact publications leads them to choose a certain group of journals. This is the case for most economic researchers (a preponderant discipline in development studies). The publications in these journals are the ones that guide their professional development and the possibility of finding a job. Certainly, the future of employment is one of the reasons why some economists don't let the multidisciplinary context influence their research.

However, there are exchanges with other disciplines, mainly in informal spaces. These exchanges involve intellectual curiosity, but do not influence the research either theoretically or methodologically. This is mainly due to the specialization that exists in this discipline and the great difference in the way a research topic is approached. The perception of causality and impact analysis is completely different, due to the preponderant use of quantitative methods.

On the other hand, some doctoral students are confronted with multidisciplinary because of their research contexts. The needs arising from field studies lead researchers to seek new explanations for phenomena outside of their disciplines. This is particularly the case for researchers with experience as development practitioners. The confrontation with the reality of the communities involves thinking about variables that are not usually included by the theoreticians.

In this way, research problems are approached with a more holistic view, but this can generate a great deal of uncertainty in the results. In the case of foreign researchers, multidisciplinary can be more complex, since they want to put in value their national theoretical approaches.

Another challenge that face multidisciplinary research is compatibility between disciplines. Interaction between some disciplines may be easier than with others, such as the interaction between international development and social work. This is reflected in the international development programs, where there is a predominance of language and concepts in disciplines such as economics or international relations. Their concepts are much more present than reflections and critiques related to the term "racism", which can be problematic in many ways.

Actually, multidisciplinary can lead to a clash of expectations on the part of supervisors. Guiding a student working in multiple disciplines can generate greater challenges in analyzing the scientific rigor of your methods and results. In addition, it was commented that some researchers may feel like an outsider, in the sense of not feeling like they have much of a frame in a particular discipline. For Morgane the fact of using a multidisciplinary approach generates sometimes a feeling of not fitting well in a research

environment. This was also the case of Owasim, for whom his research topic was at the crossroads of different disciplines such as human geography, economics and political science.

Multidisciplinarity involves making decisions in an environment of multiple possibilities and multiple constraints. Therefore, researchers may feel that they need to justify their decisions “more frequently” in their work environment. This challenge arises especially when researchers participate in conferences or when they are looking for jobs.

So, the main challenge for researchers is to confront the imaginary of multidisciplinarity as a weakness. It is difficult to share the idea that realities of the territories change very fast and demand more complex views. For this reason, academic structures and imaginaries in science must change to make way for new forms of innovation. Breaking the prejudices of monodisciplinary rigor is a duty of the new scientists if they want to have new results. For example, for Morgane there is no doubt that multidisciplinarity in development studies would contribute to the emergence of innovative approaches. For her, researchers should not be restricted in any way in carrying out their studies.

### **Multidisciplinarity as a potential**

Some students, on the other hand, see multidisciplinarity as an enormous possibility. Multidisciplinarity provides a flexibility, allowing researchers to study and explore new and existing topics with innovative approaches that are much needed. When doing research in the multidisciplinary field, it is possible to have the support to explore a variety of literatures and choose the methodology that best suits the research objectives.

Multidisciplinarity in development studies makes it possible to have a more complete analysis of a given theme. For example, as pointed out by PhD student Elsa, in the field of microeconomics it is common to use as a unit the number of people living in the same house. However, this unit does not really mean anything for some ethnic groups, such as some ethnic groups in Burkina Faso and Mali. The understanding of the extended family system in the framework of economics may not be enough, so it is necessary to approach anthropology in order to find new ways to understand the behavior of individuals. This is just one of many examples that demonstrate the importance to be open to exploring new perspectives, for a better understanding of complex contexts in developing countries.

Thus, the main advantage of multidisciplinarity is based on the richness in the analysis of a problem. Expanding discussions to other fields allows to eliminate preconceptions that may exist in a discipline, to provide new inputs and to generate new theoretical bridges. On the other hand, its main difficulty is time. Multidisciplinary studies require too much time to carry out a serious study of theories and methods in several disciplines. For example, for Emma, discussions arising from the multidisciplinary possibilities to address a particular problem may take longer than if handled from a single standpoint.

Nevertheless, some researchers are working in new spaces as bridges between disciplines. The seminar automat (Au Tour de nos Matériaux) of Paris 1 university is a good example of this. Doctoral students and researchers associated with the laboratory volunteer to teach research tools and methodologies. In this space, people from different disciplines meet and discuss the possibilities of these tools in different fields. Antoine et Jean Baptiste, for

instance, dedicated several sessions to explaining the possibilities of web scraping, data handling and graphical representations with R software.

In conclusion, the researchers agree on the need to generate more spaces for discussion and, above all, create spaces to multidisciplinary practice. The formalization of these spaces will be one of the great challenges, since it is necessary to create new types of seminars, conferences and journals. However, the opportunities to link research to new perspectives is promising not only in the academic field, but can open up new opportunities in non-institutional environments. For example, some students try to capitalize their experiences in multidisciplinary in multiple fields such as networks and civil organizations. Undoubtedly, the challenges presented by developing societies require greater efforts and better communication between disciplines.